DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 107 CG 020 040

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TITLE Full-Time Employment: How Does it Affect an Adult Daughter's Relationship with Her Aging Mother?
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (38th, New Orleans, LA, November 22-26, 1985). For related documents, see CG 020 038 and CG 020 041.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affective Measures; *Daughters; *Employed Women; Helping Relationship; Middle Aged Adults; *Mothers; *Older Adults; *Parent Child Relationship; *Role Conflict
IDENTIFIERS *Adult Children; Happiness

ABSTRACT

Although middle-aged women, those most likely to have an elderly parent, comprise the fastest growing segment of the labor force, little is known regarding how these women's increased labor force participation affects their relationships with their aging parents. To explore this issue, a study was conducted which compared the mother-daughter relationships of 15 employed and 22 unemployed married women whose elderly mothers were widowed. Daughters completed a questionnaire on filial behavior, filial role strain, and relationship quality; rated the amount of assistance they gave to their mothers; rated role strain; and completed a modified version of Bengtson's Affectual Solidarity Scale. Twenty-four of the 37 elderly mothers also completed the Affectual Solidarity Scale and rated their current level of happiness. The results indicated that, compared to unemployed daughters, the full time employed daughters had significantly worse filial relationships, scored lower on the Affectual Solidarity Scale, and scored higher on measures of role strain and role demand overload. Compared to mothers of unemployed women, the mothers of employed women also reported lower affectual solidarity and somewhat lower scores on self-perceived happiness. (Author/NB)

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FULL-TIME EMPLOYMENT:

HOW DOES IT AFFECT AN ADULT DAUGHTER'S

RELATIONSHIP WITH HER AGING MOTHER?

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Paper presented at the 38th Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, New Orleans, November, 1985.

ABSTRACT

Women between the ages of 40 and 60, those most likely to have elderly parents, comprise the fastest growing segment of the labor force. And yet, surprisingly little is known regarding how these women's increasing labor force participation affects their relationships with their aging parents.

This study compared the mother-daughter relationships of 15 employed and 22 un-employed married women (mean age = 50) whose mothers were widowed. Questionnaire data from the women and their aging mothers indicated that daughters who were employed full-time had significantly worse filial relationships. In particular, employed daughters reported lower scores on Bengtson's Affectual Solidarity Scale, and higher scores on measures of role strain and role demand overload. Their mothers also reported lower affectual solidarity, as well as somewhat lower scores on a measure of self-perceived happiness.

FULL-TIME EMPLOYMENT: HOW DOES IT AFFECT AN ADULT DAUGHTER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HER AGING MOTHER?

The provision of support for an aging parent has become increasingly problematic for adult daughters in recent years, primarily as a result of widespread changes in women's lifestyles which have led to increased role obligations. This is attributable in large part to the unprecedented increase in the number of women entering the work force, representing a 400% jump in the past 50 years (Brody, 1981). Moreover, this change has been greatest among those women most likely to have elderly parents. A recent report indicates that 62% of the women between the ages of 45 and 54 now work (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1984), accounting for the largest increase in female labor force participation of any age group during the twenty year period from 1950 to 1970 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1977).

At the same time that middle-aged women are experiencing new work roles which may conflict with filial responsibilities, demographic shifts have increased the proportion of older adults for whom they may be responsible. Longer lifespans have resulted in a significant increase in the number of elderly adults, particularly the very-old elderly who are most likely to require assistance (Brotman, 1980). These changes, along with the decline in the birthrate, mean that a greater number of middle-aged women are being called upon to assist their elderly mothers and other elderly relatives for a longer period of time than ever before, and with less assistance from their siblings (Brody, 1985).

As a result of the conflict between working, helping an aging parent, and fulfilling her other parental, marital, societal and personal responsibilities, an employed woman is likely to experience role demand

overload (Noelker & Poulshock, 1982), which occurs when a person "lacks sufficient personal time, energy and/or resources to fulfill the obligations of all the roles that he or she enacts" (Wallace & Noelker, 1984, p. 6). This is apt to be accompanied by feelings of guilt, resentment, frustration, helplessness and/or general dissatisfaction with her relationship with her elderly mother (e.g., Brody, 1981; Horowitz, 1982; Robinson & Thurnher, 1979; Scharlach & Frenzel, 1982).

Previous attempts to investigate how a daughter's employment affects her relationship with her elderly mother have been concerned primarily with the amount of contact and assistance the daughter provides (e.g., Lang & Brody, 1983; Stoller, 1983). However, very little is known about the impact of a daughter's employment on her relationship with her mother, even though mutual satisfaction with the relationship has been shown to be a more important factor than the amount of supportive contact in contributing to an elderly parent's well-being (Baruch & Barnett, 1983; Duff & Hong, 1982; Weishaus, 1979).

The present study represented an attempt to investigate the role strain experienced by middle-aged women as a result of the conflict between full-time employment and their responsibilities to their elderly mothers. In particular, this study examined the degree to which an adult daughter's employment status was related to 1) her experience of role demand overload; 2) the affectional quality of her relationship with her elderly mother; and, 3) her elderly mother's happiness.

Method

Subjects. The sample consisted of 37 women between the ages of 38 and 62 (average age = 50), who responded to notices advertising a free workshop for women whose elderly mothers were widowed, resided in the local

metropolitan area, and were able to function independently. Fifteen of the women were employed full-time outside of the home and 22 were unemployed.

In 24 of the 37 cases, the daughters indicated that it would be possible also to interview their widowed mothers. The mothers ranged in age from 69 to 92 (mean age = 78), and did not require assistance with more than one of the physical activities of daily living (e.g., bathing, eating, ambulating independently). However, many of these elderly women did need help with some of the instrumental activities of daily living (e.g., house cleaning, shopping, transportation), which have been identified by Lawton and his colleagues (Lawton et al., 1982).

Measures. Each of the 37 daughters completed a questionnaire containing measures of filial behavior, filial role strain, and relationship quality. To assess the amount of assistance she was currently giving her mother, each daughter was asked to rate, on a six-point scale, how frequently she actually provided each of 21 possible types of physical and emotional support which a community-dwelling older adult might need (as identified by Cicirelli (1981) and Lawton et al. (1982)).

A measure of perceived role overload was obtained by asking each daughter to rate, on a five-point scale, how often she felt that she was doing more for her mother than was fair to expect of her, given all of her other obligations. In addition, a general assessment of role strain was obtained from responses to Zarit's Burden Interview (Zarit and Zarit, 1982), which asked each daughter to rate, on a five-point scale, the frequency with which she experienced feelings such as resentment, guilt, and not having enough time for herself, as a result of her interactions with her mother.

Relationship quality was assessed with a modified form of Bengtson's Affectual Solidarity Scale (Bengtson & Black, 1973), which included

additional questions such as "How close do you feel to your mother?" and "How much do you enjoy your visits together?" The 24 mothers also completed the Affectual Solidarity Scale, and rated their current level of happiness, on a three-point scale.

Results

Mean scores for daughters who were employed full-time were compared with scores for non-working daughters. Employed daughters experienced significantly greater burden ($t=2.48$, $p=.02$) and had higher levels of role demand overload ($t=2.69$, $p=.01$). In addition, they reported poorer quality relationships ($t=-2.84$, $p=.007$), as did their mothers ($t=-1.70$, $p=.10$). Their mothers also were less happy than the mothers of non-working women ($t=-1.65$, $p=.10$). However, the amount of contact and assistance that the employed daughters provided was not significantly less than that provided by the daughters who were not employed ($t=-1.21$, $p>.20$).

Evidently, the more a daughter's attempts to help her mother conflict with her employment or other responsibilities, the more strain the daughter is likely to experience, the poorer the quality of the mother-daughter relationship, and the less happy the mother is apt to be. One participant explained it this way:

> Ever since Dad passed away, I've done everything for my mother, just trying to make her feel better. Sometimes I've had to take time away from the kids or leave my job early in order to help her around the house or take her to the doctor or other places. But, she doesn't really seem to appreciate everything I do for her. And, what's worse, sometimes I'm not sure it's really making her any happier.

Discussion

This study has provided striking evidence that a daughter's employment status is significantly related to the amount of role strain she experiences in her attempts to help her elderly mother, the quality of the mother-daughter relationship (from the perspective of both daughter and mother), and the mother's happiness.

Previous investigations regarding a daughter's employment have primarily have been concerned with the impact on a daughter's ability to provide contact and assistance for her elderly mother. Such studies have generally found, as we did, that employment has only a slight, and often non-significant, effect on the amount of assistance that daughters provide their elderly mothers (e.g., Horowitz et al., 1983; Lang & Brody, 1983; Stoller, 1983). However, to our knowledge, no previous study has demonstrated empirically that a daughter's employment is associated with an impairment in the quality of her relationship with her elderly mother or a decrease in the mother's reported psychological well-being.

The process by which a daughter's employment affects her mother's well-being remains a matter of speculation at this time. One possibility is that whatever strain a daughter experiences as a result of competing role demands is manifested in subtle ways in her interactions with her mother, and thereby affects the quality of their relationship. For a widowed mother, who is apt to rely heavily on her daughter for emotional support (Lopata, 1973), evidence of her daughter's dissatisfaction or a disruption in the quality of their relationship may be particularly detrimental, regardless of the amount of assistance being provided. This may especially be true when the mother is relatively independent and does not need a great deal of assistance, as

was the case for the elderly women in this study.

A second possibility is that the demands of full-time employment may make it more difficult for a daughter to provide support at a time and in a manner which would be most beneficial for her mother and herself. Evidence for this proposition comes from a recent study by Horowitz and her colleagues (Horowitz, et al., 1983), which found that working women are able to provide as much support for their elderly parents as do non-working women by adhering to a rigid schedule and giving up whatever free time they have for themselves. As a result, they may not be able to help their parents at a time best suited to the parent's needs or their own desires.

As Horowitz and her colleagues note, such routinization of contact may have significant consequences for the quality, even if not the quantity, of support a daughter is able to give to her elderly parent. The result may be filial contact which is so oriented to meeting concrete needs that affectional aspects of the relationship may be neglected, with potential negative consequences for the well-being of both the elderly parent and the adult daughter, as Schmidt illustrates in the following example:

> Joan K. goes to her mother's house each day. Her mother proposes that they talk but Joan says there isn't time and does chores instead. Her mother thinks of more things for Joan to do in order to keep her there and she punctuates her orders with self-pitying remarks designed to make Joan feel guilty at leaving.
>
> (Schmidt, 1980, p. 262)

It is also possible for the direction of causality to be the other way around: an elderly mother's unhappiness may create added pressure on her daughter, thereby increasing the daughter's sense of role strain. Or, a daughter's decision to work full-time may reflect values regarding women's

roles that differ from her mother's values, and may therefore be only one manifestation of difficulties in the mother-daughter relationship.

Further research is needed to unravel the direction of these effects and better explicate the process by which a daughter's full-time employment can impair emotional aspects of a filial relationship and affect an elderly mother's happiness, while not necessarily altering the amount of contact or assistance that is being provided.

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